Fusae Yoshida

Fusae Yoshida at the Oakland Buddhist Church

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I connected with Fusae Yoshida through the Oakland Buddhist Church's senior citizen group, Momiji-kai. This church holds tons of history for our family, having been the same church my grandmother attended for over 50 years and the one that hosted her and my grandfather's memorial.

Fusae, or Fuzy, as she is commonly known, is presently one of the older interviewees I've spoken to: she was 14 when she went into camp. Originally from Washington, she was the oldest of four children and grew up near the Puget Sound, living off of the fresh salmon, cod, squid, and octopus her father and grandfather caught. Her own history with the church is impressive, dating back to 1946. Though the camps separated her from her Washington childhood friends, an old group reunited in the Bay Area after the war ended. "I don't think I became really close friends with anybody in camp until I came back to Oakland and found my childhood friend here, then she and I both started coming to the church. And we found some more people from Tacoma who started coming to the church."

It was fitting that it was here I heard her story.

I was born in Tacoma, Washington. And the first camp was an assembly center in Pinedale, which is in Fresno county. And we were there for about three months and then we were all shipped to Tule Lake. Then after a year in Tule Lake, they had this loyalty oath which was a big to-do. And my father said, "I'm not going back to Japan. I want to raise my kids in the USA." And so he said yes-yes he'll be loyal and all this. We had my mother's sister's family and my grandparents. I'll tell you about my grandfather later on.

And so we all signed up as a group, we wanted to be together. Everyone gave their preference of what camp they wanted to go to. Most of the people from Washington wanted to go to Minidoka but since we signed up as a group we were shipped to Jerome, Arkansas. It was quite an interesting place, it was a swampland. They decided to close that camp after we were there a year. That was my junior year in high school. So, we were shipped out again. This time we were shipped to Heart Mountain, Wyoming, near Yellowstone. In fact I went to Yellowstone while I was in that camp.

How were you able to do that?

For $5 they chartered a bus and we were able to get out. After a while, it was just liberal. We used to walk out of camp near the end, get out of the gate, and go over to the Shoshone River nearby at the camp and we would have weenie bakes. We'd get invited by Boys Clubs or something like that. So it was, in a way, a fun time. That was my senior year in high school. By then, my father let me start going to dances. Until then he was very strict, you know how parents were. So I had a great social life in my senior year of high school and the war ended.

But it was really sad times because my parents lost everything they had. They had a small laundry business, just got out of debt. And I grew up in poverty during the Depression. And then my parents started a laundry business, got themselves out of debt and we were finally going places when the war started.

Can we backtrack a little bit to talk about your parents and what it was like growing up in Washington?

My father had a small produce market but he had to file for bankruptcy because of the Depression in the early '30s. So he did menial jobs like going to work on farms. Then finally he got fairly good job shucking oysters and he became a foreman of this Japanese group that shucked oysters for a seafood company. That's when I learned to eat oysters, and I love oysters to

this day. Love raw oysters.

And then they got into a laundry business. Bought out some family's business because this couple wanted to go back to Japan. So my parents were in this laundry business for two or three years. They had borrowed some money from friends, and they paid off the money. For the first time in our lives we had a refrigerator, we had a telephone. Because during the poverty years, we just had an icebox where my mother bought ice. And we walked, everywhere. My grandfather had a car, but we didn't.

What was one of the hardest things about growing up during the Depression?

You didn't know anything better. In those days, I was wearing 98 cent dresses and expensive dresses were a $1.98, shall I say.

What do you remember about the day Pearl Harbor happened?

It was Sunday. On the way home from Buddhist Church Sunday school I heard some men talking on the street. But when I got home my mother had found out from friends about Pearl Harbor. And my father had gone fishing so my mother was worried. So they came back and my grandfather had gone fishing too, because we lived near the Puget Sound. But when my grandfather came back from fishing, the FBI was waiting for him because he was a civic leader. He was involved in church and in the Japanese language school.

That same day they were waiting?

Yeah, that day. That night they took him in. And the families didn't even know where they were taken. Finally found out they were taken to Missoula, Montana. Later I heard from this Italian guy who was also in Missoula, that they had sort of a mock hearing. I was too young to know about it or question anything. Later on he was sent to Santa Fe and Lordsburg, New Mexico. But I always wrote to my grandfather, once a week, a small letter in my broken Japanese. I always wrote to him. And after a year they released my grandfather. To this day I'm sorry that I wasn't older to question him

about what happened in those camps because it was much different than the camps we were in, you know.

Yes, the FBI camps. Did you notice something about him that changed?

Yes. When he came back to Tule Lake where we were, he got off the bus, and he was an old man. To this day I cry when I think about it. He had aged so much, it was so noticeable. But I was too young to question him about what happened in those camps. There's more and more things being written nowadays through diaries. Japanese are great in writing diaries and a lot of people had hidden diaries evidently because they're starting to translate them.

My mother was born in 1907 in Napa, California. Then they moved to Tacoma, Washington. And then when my mother was about seven, they took a trip to Japan. And when they got to Japan, the grandparents on the father's side said they wanted to raise my mother. And so she was left there for ten years and to think, how lonely it must have been. My mother came back when she was 17 or 18. My mother and her mother, they were never close. They were strangers.

Did your mom ever talk about her experience in Japan?

No.

Do you think it was a hard time?

I don't know about having a hard time but I think it was a lonely childhood. I visited her hometown because my grandfather's side came from samurai stock and not a peasant stock. So our family record on my mother's side is recorded over 600 years. And I have it written in Japanese, photocopies of it.

That's really interesting.

The lord of that province commended the samurai of a "battle well fought." All those [copies] are in Japanese, and I know about it but I can't even read

it and I can only speak the language. But my grandfather's last name was Mori. And I think it's a seaside town. What happened was, the family owned this vast piece of property and the two brothers just gave it all to the farmers during the land reform and came to the U.S., looking for gold I should say. Then one brother went back to Japan and my grandfather died a poor man. He even went to Alaska looking for gold. I think my grandfather and brother didn't want to farm their land so they thought there was more opportunity in the U.S.

Do you remember any conversations with your parents about moving to the camps?

They went with the flow, evidently. They packed up. They closed their laundry business. And we waited for evacuation because we knew it was coming.

Did you ever experience anything negative at school?

Our school wasn't that bad, I didn't feel it. I was in junior high. In fact, the school gave a special farewell assembly. The Mayor of Tacoma was one of the very few people who opposed the evacuation. He later became a U.S. senator. I think he was one of the very few who opposed the evacuation.

In camp, everybody started to separate. Everybody just did nothing. This was the beginning of family getting scattered. Boys went with their group and girls went with their group. My mother would occasionally work in this canteen. They used to bring in fresh tuna from Denver or some place. She would go to the mess hall and bring the food home. Because a lot of people would eat in the mess hall. A lot of people would go and get three meals a day and eat at their own home. Not very many, but there were people [who did that].

Why do you think they did so?

Well, they want privacy and maybe they didn't want to intermingle with the rest of the crowd.

That's true. And what was your first impression of Tule Lake?

Just a dust bowl. It was a huge, huge camp. But I was a teenager, you got to figure that. It didn't affect me as much, I had my friends. We palled around, walked to school together. Ice and snow and everything else.

Tule Lake eastern boundary fence. Photo courtesy of Frank Sato Collection

Maybe it's because I grew up in poverty but I wanted to have some money to buy things I wanted through the Montgomery Wards catalog. So, the first summer I was there, I knew there was a waitress job open at our mess hall. I couldn't get a job because I was too young so I used my father's cousin's wife's name because she wasn't working. And I got a full $16 check, which was really good. So she would just endorse the check and I would have $16 to spend. And that's how I made three months of my spending money which was great for me. Then we went to Jerome and I didn't work there.

But when we went to Wyoming, there was a clerk job. It was my first clerical job. And when school started, I should've taken college prep but I figured I won't be able to go to college because my family couldn't afford it, so I just took business courses and I only had to go to school half a day. So I took a job for half a day at the adult education supervisor's office as a receptionist. I must have gotten $12 a month in the warehouse, and I got $8 a month working part time. I did anything to get some money.

What did you want to buy?

Anything, like new shoes, anything for my own personal use.

Were your mother and father working in camp?

Yeah they were working in camp. Then my mother took up sewing and drafting up clothing in camp, so she made all my clothes. My mother made all my skirts. In those days you wore pleated skirts.

You mentioned that your father finally let you go to a dance. What do you remember about the dance and that night?

Learning how to communicate with people. You know you go to a dance and talk to a strange boy and all that. I think I learned my conversational skills by meeting strangers for the first time.

Do you remember anyone you spoke to in particular?

My husband passed away twenty years ago. But a boy who dated me when I was 18 is presently my boyfriend. But he's not too well right now, he's getting old. We've traveled the last 15 years. Been about ten times to Japan, to Europe, we've gone on cruises, gone down the Panama Canal, we've done everything. And my husband was a traveller too and he and I traveled. But after he was gone I said, gee.

It's just nice to go with someone.

But now he can't travel anymore so now I'm traveling with my older children.

Did you meet shortly after camp?

No, we met in camp because his girlfriend left for Nebraska. And then I came to Oakland and he was living in San Jose and he dated me again. But in the meantime, his girlfriend came back from Nebraska and he married her because he had gone with her for about three years. And I married someone else I met in the flower business.

But you two stayed friends.

We never saw each other, we didn't even knew who each other married, never communicated.

How did you get back in touch?

They started camp reunions. And the first camp reunion I went to, someone called me and I didn't recognize him but I recognized his voice. He had changed so much. Gotten fatter or something. [*laughs*] People change, but he recognized me.

And you hadn't seen him since—

Right after camp. I hadn't seen him for 35 years or something like that. It's fun.

Do you remember what your parents' feelings were towards going to camp? Were they feeling distant from Japan or were they angry about what was happening?

I really don't know. I never overheard their conversation. They thought they had to somehow carry on in the U.S. They had no intention of going back to Japan. When my father came back to Oakland, his hobby was gardening. He should've been a gardener from the beginning because even in camp he had flowers growing in pots and things like that. We always had a garden, wherever we lived, no matter how poor we were. He would have fields of dahlias blooming or plants growing. So he started working for another guy as a gardener. It was natural to him. I used to have a quarter

acre, beautiful Japanese rock garden.

Why do you think he didn't pursue that as his profession?

He was not an aggressive man. He never drove a car. I don't think he was the type of man who would get into something unless he was hired by someone. But he was just a natural gardner.

What would you say was the most difficult part of camp?

What bothered me the most was that I was separated from my childhood friends and we were sent to Arkansas while all my friends were sent to Minidoka where the Seattle group was located. So I was on my own. I had to start making my own friends and that was very difficult.

Toshi Mizoguchi, an Issei farmer and a bachelor, is captured here in a solemn expression by Dorothea Lange in 1942

I felt sorry for a lot of people. They were kicking people out of camp in 1945. And they were looking for translators because a lot of people didn't speak in English. Somehow I got recruited in translation and I remember interviewing some people, some old bachelors. You know, "Where do you want to go back?" They said they didn't know where they wanted to go back. They had no money. That's where I really felt, I guess like an adult: What's going to happen to these people? They didn't have a sense of returning. To what? Because there were people like that.

We were lucky we had family. Those who had family were most fortunate. But those single people.

ORIGINALLY POSTED ON OCTOBER 30, 2016